

Burn 3

by Kami Garcia

THE FACES OF missing children flash across three vid screens above our heads, forming a gargantuan triangle that looms over the street. Children have been disappearing for weeks now. Protectorate officers claim they're runaways, but there's nowhere to go inside the Dome. The truth is no one cares about a bunch of poor kids from Burn 3.

I glance at the screen again and squeeze my little sister's hand tighter, dragging her through the filthy alley.

"Why are we running?" Sky asks.

"We're just walking fast."

I don't like bringing her outside at night, but we're out of purification tablets and she hasn't had any water all day. The dirty streets are bathed in

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could drink it straight from the faucet, and walk outside to stand in the sun without layers of protective clothing. That was before his mind deteriorated and I couldn't tell if his stories were memories or delusions.

A siren eclipses the sounds around us and an automated voice issues a directive. "Alert: the atmosphere inside the Dome has reached Level 2. Please put on your goggles and return to your domiciles immediately. Alert: the atmosphere inside the Dome—"

"Hurry home," the old woman says, collapsing the tarp around her like a tent.

My sister looks up at me, blue eyes wide. "I'm scared, Phoenix."

"Put on your goggles." I dig in my pocket for mine.

She unfolds the wraparound eyewear that makes everything look bright green, a color you never see inside the Dome.

"Run," I yell, pulling her along behind me.

A man pushes Sky, and she stumbles. He glances at her and starts to turn away without offering help or an apology. Tears run down my sister's face.

I shove him as hard as I can, and grab my sister's hand. She runs behind me until we reach our

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neon light from the signs marking the rows of identical black metal doors that serve as storefronts. In the distance, towering buildings covered in silver reflective panels rise up around a labyrinth of alleys. Those buildings are all that's left of the city that stood here twenty years ago. Retrofitted and repurposed for the world we live in now. I've never been anywhere near there. It's the wealthy part of Burn 3, no place for poor kids like us.

We reach an exposed stall draped in a black plastic tarp. An old woman swathed in layers of dark fabric huddles underneath. Her face is pebbled on one side, the result of poorly healed burns. Even though the Dome keeps us under a constant shadow, it's dangerous to be outside all day, and I feel sorry for her. But few people can afford the high rent for an indoor shop.

"Two purification tablets, please." I hold out the coins stamped with a crude number three on both sides.

She takes the currency in her gloved hand and gives me two pink tablets. They don't look like much, but they'll turn the black water running through the pipes a safer shade of gray. Before our father died, he told us stories about the world before the Burn. A time when water was clear and you

building, a twenty-story domicile divided into single rooms. The Dome is so crowded that there's nowhere left to build but up, even though it's more dangerous on the higher floors.

Our room is on the eighteenth floor.

I unlock the door and push Sky inside. "Get in the shelter."

She scrambles for the makeshift tent in the center of the room. It's made from Firestall, an engineered material that absorbs heat and UV rays.

The Dome is supposed to protect us from the holes in the ozone layer—holes that turned more than two-thirds of the world to ash twenty years ago. But the sun's invisible hand can still reach into the Dome. The burns people suffer on a daily basis are proof of that. Most of us have been victims at least once, our skin curling like the edges of burning paper.

Some people believe you're more likely to get burned in the buildings without reflective panels like this one. I don't know if it's true, but I can't take chances with my sister. Sky's skin is perfectly smooth. She's never felt the savage itching and heat of a burn, and I'm not going to let her feel it now.

We huddle together in the darkness, and Sky chokes back tears. "I'm scared."

“Don’t worry.” I pull her closer and listen to the alert repeating over and over until I fall asleep, more worried than ever.

In the morning, I look out the small window and see people wandering through the streets. The alert must be over, though many are still wearing their protective goggles. My father told me this city was called New York before the Burn. The buildings were even taller than the ones beyond the alleys, so tall they seemed to touch the clouds. He said you could see the clouds too—white streaks in a blue sky. A sky filled with beauty instead of destruction.

The Burn happened suddenly, although scientists had predicted it years before. The sky turned red and the temperature rose dangerously. No one could step outside without suffering third-degree burns. Within weeks, the heat was melting steel and plastic. My father said hundreds of thousands died after inhaling the toxic fumes from their disintegrating homes.

For years, people lived in the sewers or underground shelters until scientists developed a compound strong enough to withstand the temperatures in the areas where the atmosphere was still intact.

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I glance around the room. She’s not here, but someone else was. Blankets are strewn all over the floor, and the shelter is shredded.

“Sky!” I know she won’t answer, but I keep calling her name. This can’t be happening. Children have been disappearing from the streets, not from the domiciles.

I run for the door and trip over the shredded strips of Firestall. My face hits the cement floor hard, and for a second, the room sways. I push up onto my knees, and something glints under the black strips of material.

A glass bottle the size of my thumb. It has a silver cap with a hole in the top, but the bottle is empty. A white label is peeling off the front. I’ve never seen anything like it in the stores along the alleyways.

I hit the stairs and notice the open door a floor below me. Clothes and personal items are strewn across the floor. Sky might not be the only kid missing.

I’m back in the streets, running down the alley under the neon signs. “Sky?”

I check the shops she frequents, like the one with hand-sewn dolls that cost more than we spend on a week’s worth of food packets. Or the store several blocks away where they sell tea made from roots

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People traveled hundreds of miles underground until they reached a safe zone—a place without a hole in the sky above it. They built the Dome and named our city Burn 3 because it was the third city in the world to turn to ash.

From where I stand looking down on the black coats rushing through the gray streets, the city still looks like it’s made of ash.

I drop the purification tablets into two black cups of water and watch the liquid turn a less lethal shade of charcoal. I choke mine down and leave Sky’s on the counter. She’s still asleep, blond hair peeking out from beneath the ratty blanket. I can’t stand to wake her. The world of her dreams is so much better than the one we live in.

I leave her a note instead.

An hour later, I climb the eighteen flights of stairs with two food packets tucked in my pocket. Noodles with spicy red sauce, Sky’s favorite. Orange doors line both sides of the hallways and I can see ours from the landing.

It’s wide open.

My pulse quickens, and I bolt up the stairs. Sky would never open the door for anyone. She knows better. “Sky?”

and the salve that heals burns.

I stop a woman selling bread packets on the street. “Have you seen a little girl with blond hair?” It’s Sky’s most recognizable feature.

Almost no one has blond hair or blue eyes anymore. My father said they made people more vulnerable to the sun, a vicious sort of natural selection. It’s the reason I rarely take Sky outside during the day, and keep every inch of her skin covered when I do.

The woman shakes her head. “Haven’t seen no blond hair.”

I stand in the middle of the street, the black doors stretching out in front of me, the vid screens above me.

She’s not here.

I think about my sister’s smile and the way she never complains when we don’t have enough to eat. I can see her blue eyes, bright and curious. My mother named her Sky because of her eyes. She said the real sky was just as blue once. I look up at the Dome and the red sky beyond it.

I would trade a real blue sky in a second to find her.

Faces flash across the gigantic vid screens one by one.

Sky's will be up there tomorrow.

I've never been inside the Protectorate. Protectorate officers are dangerous—as quick to draw their guns as the criminals they hunt. And Burn 3 is full of criminals, men with nothing left to lose who will cut your throat over a few coins or a food packet. I try not to imagine Sky in their hands.

The building is made of Firestall, the same material used to construct the Dome. It's only used for government buildings, and the Protectorate is the only government facility in this part of town.

I burst through the doors, and the scanners go off. There's nothing in my pockets except the glass bottle. I don't own anything but the clothes on my back, and I spent all the coins I had this morning.

"Stop right there," an officer shouts. His weapon is pointed at me, the red glow signaling that it's armed. He's prepared to use the heat we all fear to kill me.

"I'm sorry," I stammer. "My sister—she's missing. I think someone took her."

"Scan her." He nods at another officer, with smooth hands a few shades darker than the flesh on his face and neck. Skin always takes on a darker shade after it heals from a burn. Judging by his

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"My sister doesn't have problems." I realize how ridiculous it sounds as soon as I say it. "No more than anyone else."

I don't know how to make them believe me. For a second, all I can think about is my father. He died two years ago, slowly poisoned by toxic fumes he and the other evacuators inhaled decades ago when they risked their lives to save others. My father would know what to say to make these men listen.

I shove my hands into my pockets, my fists curled in frustration. The cool glass slides against my skin, and I remember the bottle safely tucked inside. My hand closes around it, but I hesitate. What if they take it? I don't trust these men, and it's the only clue I have.

The officer with the scanner looks bored. "I'm sorry your sister's missing, kid. But we can't chase down every runaway."

I take a deep breath and swallow my anger. If I lose control, I'll end up in one of the cages hanging above us, and I won't be able to look for Sky. "Did you ever think that someone might be taking them?"

They both laugh. "Why would anyone want extra mouths to feed?"

"Maybe they're not feeding them." It's hard to

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hands, he was burned badly. Only the expensive salves can smooth the texture of the affected skin.

The officer waves a small electronic device over my body. "She's clean."

The weapon lowers, and I struggle to catch my breath. I notice the cages hanging above us—at least twenty feet from where I'm standing. Arms hang between the bars. There are men inside.

"Someone broke into our room at the domicile, and my little sister is missing. She's only ten."

Please help me.

"How do you know it was a break-in?" the Protectorate officer with the scanner asks.

"The door was wide open, and everything inside was destroyed."

He shakes his head. "Maybe she left in a hurry. Don't you watch the vid screens? You know how many kids run away every day?"

I try to make sense of what he's saying, but I can't. "You think they're running away? Where would they go?"

The one with the weapon leaning against his shoulder shrugs. "The Abyss maybe. Who knows? Lots of kids like it down there. Plenty of stuff on the black market to help them forget about their problems."

believe these idiots are responsible for protecting us. But I have to convince them to believe me.

I start to pull the bottle out of my pocket—

"Sounds like a conspiracy theory." He shakes his head. "Did you come up with that on your own, or are you one of those crazy evacuators' kids?"

My whole body stiffens, and I push the bottle back down into my pocket.

The evacuators are the only reason you're alive.

That's what I want to tell him, but the familiar shame eats away at my stomach instead. My father was crazy, a fact I tried to hide when he was alive.

But he taught me to trust my instincts, which is the reason I slide my hand back out of my pocket. Empty.

A cage above us rattles, and something falls, nearly hitting one of the officers. His head jerks up. "Throw something out of there again, and I'll rip your arms off. You hear me? Then I'll send you back down to the Abyss, and we'll see if you can steal without them."

His partner looks at me. "You kids think the Abyss is one big party because there are no rules, but it's full of criminals. If you spend enough time down there, you'll end up in a cage too."

Full of criminals . . .

These men aren't going to help me find Sky. I'm going to have to do it myself.

But at least now I know where to look.

The entrance to the Abyss is a round metal plate in the street. A ladder leads to what's left of the underground city where everyone lived until scientists figured out how to build the Dome. I climb down until the ladder reaches the damp ground, the mouths of stone tunnels surrounding me. Names and arrows are painted on the walls, directions to places I don't recognize.

My father brought me down here once when I was Sky's age. I remember the darkness punctuated by dim strings of tiny bulbs that led to a crowded market of open stalls. He was looking for a friend, one of the guys like him who helped thousands of burned and injured people find their way down here during the Evacuation. He bought me a piece of dried meat from a stall—the first thing I'd ever eaten that didn't come from a sealed silver pouch—and left me to play games with the other children while he spoke to a man with one arm. My father didn't explain the visit, and made me swear never to go down into the underbelly of the city again.

He would understand why I am breaking that

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the cages for possessing aboveground. But here, people are bartering for drinks in dark glass bottles and matches—a controlled substance in Burn 3. The sight of them makes my skin itch as if it's already on fire.

"Whatcha lookin' for, kid? Jerky? Cigarettes?" a man with an eye patch shouts.

I don't know what he's talking about. "Have you seen a girl with blond hair? About this tall?" I hold up my hand to match Sky's height.

His eye narrows, and he glances over his shoulder. "Little girls don't buy cigarettes."

I try again. "Have you seen her? She's wearing a black tunic and outercoat."

He strikes a match in front of me and watches it burn.

"Do you know what this is?" I hold the glass bottle with the printed label in my palm.

His eye grows wide, and he covers my hand with his, closing my fingers around the bottle. "Not here," he hisses under his breath.

"I don't—"

He jerks my arm so hard it feels like he's trying to break it. "Got me those cigarettes back here," he yells loud enough for anyone listening to hear.

I don't know what cigarettes are, but I know I

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promise now.

I don't remember the name of the place my father took me, so I choose a random tunnel and follow the steady stream of water and rats. I can't imagine Sky down here. Everything about her is clean and bright.

I try to imagine my father guiding me, but all I can think about is the last thing he said before he died. When the toxicity levels in his blood rose so high we had to admit him to a clinic. "Be brave, Phoenix. Take care of your sister."

Another broken promise to my father.

My feet are soaked by the time I hear voices and notice a pool of pale light in the distance. The tunnel opens up, and I see the stalls. They're lined up in crooked rows, the ripped awnings forming aisles. Tiny strings of white bulbs dangle above them. I'm not sure if this is the same market I visited as a child.

I scan the crowd, searching for any trace of my sister's blond hair. I move closer to the stalls and watch as customers haggle over the price of burnt books, medicine long past its expiration date, and sweets in clear plastic wrappers instead of pouches. Everything the merchants are selling here is illegal. Things the Protectorate officers would throw you in

wouldn't buy them—or anything else—from him.

"Come on." He slips between the stalls and gestures for me to follow. The opening to another tunnel waits, but there are no strings of lights hanging across this one. It's completely dark. Even the water trickling from the mouth looks blacker.

I shouldn't follow him. I've heard stories of kids being hacked to pieces in the alleys of Burn 3. Down here, it could be worse. But at sixteen, I'm not a kid anymore—only a year younger than my father was when he saved hundreds of people—and my sister is missing.

"Where are we going?" My voice echoes against the slick walls.

"Shh!" He waves a scarred hand at me. The skin is darker and rough, the mark of a severe burn. I picture a pack of lit matches in his hand and the flame jumping from the matchstick to his clothes.

I blink the image away and listen to his footsteps to be sure they stay ahead of mine. If he stops walking, I want to know. But he doesn't, moving quickly until we reach a dead end.

A lopsided wooden shack leans against the tunnel wall, its windows covered in black tape. Who blacks out their windows when they live underground?

Someone crazy.

The man glances around as if he thinks we've been followed. Satisfied, he sorts through the keys attached to a long chain at his waist, carefully matching them to the rows of locks on the door.

He's just like the evacuator who was exposed to burning plastic and other chemicals. Paranoid. The ones who didn't die immediately went crazy, their minds rotting away from the poison they inhaled to save others. I should know.

I don't want to go in, but what if he knows something about Sky or the bottle I found?

"Get inside." He opens the door and shoves me through.

A cracked bulb buzzes to life, and when I see the room, I realize he is crazy. The walls are plastered with papers, strange numbers and symbols scrawled all the way to the corners. And photos—not digital scans, but actual photos—of children with dirty faces and tired eyes. One stands out.

The boy has blond hair like Sky's. I can't take my eyes off his face.

"Who are all these kids?" I point at the pictures, the edges water-stained and bent.

He takes a long look at the photos and swallows hard. "Mind your own business," he snaps.

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convince him to help me. "My father is dead, and my sister is all I have."

"How did he die?" The man's tone is suspicious.

"What?" I don't know why he cares, but he waits for me to answer. "My father was an evacuator," I say as if that's explanation enough.

He flips his eye patch up, and there's a hollow recess where his eyeball should be. "Then you know what it's like when they take someone from you."

Those are the delusions talking. This guy is too far gone to give me any information, and I've already wasted enough time. I turn to leave. "Thanks for your help."

The man starts pacing in the cramped space, muttering and biting his nails. I remember the way my father paced at night when he thought we were asleep. Sometimes his mind was sound, and others I could see the effects of the poison he inhaled during the Evacuation. Toxins that were slowly killing him.

"Wait here." The man disappears behind a folding screen, and I can hear him rummaging around. He emerges wearing a heavy black coat that makes his thin frame look much bigger.

"I really think I should—"

He slides a rotted panel of wood along the back wall of the shack, revealing the opening to another

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I step away from the images and the numbers I don't understand. Boxes of dirty beakers and lab equipment are stacked along the far wall, next to torn and partially burnt books. He must have salvaged the books from somewhere. I doubt he could afford to buy them.

"Know what those are?" He points to the strange symbols and numbers and shakes his head before I have a chance to answer. "Course you don't. Those are equations. Scientific compounds."

"I'm just trying to find my sister."

He points at my pocket. "Show it to me one more time."

I hand him the bottle, and he holds it up to the light. "Ketamine. Give a kid enough of this stuff and they lose consciousness—or worse."

I clench my fists, imagining someone dragging my sister's limp body out of the domicile.

"Makes it easy to take them to the Skinners."

The word makes my skin crawl, even though I don't know what it means. "What's a Skinner?"

He turns quickly, so he can look at me with his good eye. "Are you messing with me? If you're holding that bottle, you know who they are. Or you will soon."

"Please tell me." I don't know what I can say to

sewer tunnel. "Do you want to find your sister or not?"

I have no way of knowing if this man has any information—if the symbols on his walls are scientific equations or the delusions of a damaged mind. But something about the photos of the children convinces me he knows something, even if he is insane.

My father had moments of clarity when every word he spoke was the truth. This man reminds me of him, the flashes of sanity grappling for footing on the sliding rocks of madness. If one of those moments can help me find Sky, I have to follow him.

We step into the darkness, and a flame illuminates the void. The man is holding a gold object between his fingers. A small flame rises up from the wick inside it. "Never seen one of these before, have you?"

I shake my head and take a step back. No one produces fire intentionally in Burn 3. The risk of starting a fire is too great when there is so little water to extinguish one.

I picture the flame catching his skin again and wonder if that's how he got the burn on his hand.

"It's called a lighter. You fill this part with oil."

He taps on the bottom half of the rectangular object. "Then you turn this dial and it strikes the flint."

I nod as if I understand, and he seems satisfied.

We move deeper into the sewage tunnel, the device he calls a lighter illuminating barely a few feet in front of us. "Kids started disappearing down here first. Bet you didn't know that, did you?"

I remember the photos from his walls. Were they missing children from the Abyss?

"The vid screens don't broadcast news outside of Burn 3."

He shakes his head at my ignorance. "We aren't outside of Burn 3."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

He waves me off. "Forget it. Children who live aboveground with hair the color of the sun will always be more valuable than ours."

"But the boy in the picture on your wall had blond hair."

His body tenses and I realize I've made a mistake mentioning it. "Don't worry about the kids down here. Your sister's the one you care about."

Heat creeps up my neck, and shame settles in the pit of my empty stomach. The Abyss—the underground sewers I'm walking through—were the only safe place to live for years. Now people don't

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He stops, the edges of his coat floating in the ankle-deep water. "You really don't know what they're doing down here, do you?" His expression is a twisted mixture of terror and wonder, as if he can't fathom the idea.

I shake my head, afraid to answer.

"They're stealing kids so they can sell them for parts."

I couldn't have heard him right. I want to run and pretend this guy inhaled too much burning plastic—that everything he's told me is the delusion of a rotted mind. Anything to avoid asking the next question I know I have to ask. "What kind of parts?"

He doesn't hesitate. "Why do you think they call them Skinners?"

The ground slides out from under me, and I stagger.

My sister . . .

He reaches out and grabs my elbow to steady me. "If they have your sister and she looks the way you say, we have to hurry."

The words turn over in my mind, but I can't make sense of them. There is only one word caught in the tangled threads of my thoughts.

Skinner.

I push past it, forcing myself to hear what this

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venture down here unless they want to buy something on the black market. He's right. No one cares if kids in the Abyss go missing.

Yet I expect this stranger to care about my sister. A little blond girl from a world that treats the people in his like rats. "I just meant—"

He cuts me off again. "I know what you meant. Now shut up. We're getting closer."

Closer to what?

The cement cylinder stretches out in front us, murky water splashing under our boots. The stench of mold turns to something more nauseating, one even worse than flesh burning.

I try not to gag. "What is that?"

"The smell of bodies rotting."

"Where is it coming from?" I whisper.

He nods into the darkness. "The old labs where the scientists worked before they built the Dome. The place where they figured out how people could walk in the sun again." His tone is sarcastic. We both know no one can walk in the sun. Everyone in Burn 3 is hiding, above *and* belowground. "The labs are abandoned now. At least, they're supposed to be."

The hair rises on the back of my neck. "Who's in there?"

stranger is saying. "If she looks what way?"

"Light-haired," he says. "It's rare. I haven't seen someone with light hair since—" He stops, his expression defeated. "Rare things are always worth more money to the people doing the selling. And the ones buying."

He is talking about Sky like she is a bottle of clean water or a book—an object to be bought and sold at one of the stalls in the underground market. He doesn't know how kind she is—the way she shares her food packets with the poorer children in the domicile, though she never has enough to eat herself. The way she pretends the life we have now is equal to the one we had when my father was alive to protect us. The way she never doubts me, even when I doubt myself.

I look at the man I'm following blindly. "What's your name?"

Suddenly, I want to know. I am trusting him with my sister's life, which is worth much more to me than my own.

He strikes the flint on the lighter again, and the flame casts a strange glow over his face. "A name is a way to make a claim. No one can claim me."

I watch the familiar paranoia creep into his features. He reminds me of my father again. "A

name is also the way you claim your friends.”

He turns his back on me and disappears into the darkness. “I don’t need any friends.”

I follow the echo of his footsteps in silence, hoping with each step that we are getting closer to Sky. I try to ignore the grim reality—that if I find her and this man is telling the truth, she won’t be alone.

I need to know more about the Skinners—these monsters kidnapping children to sell their skin. For what? I didn’t even know.

“What—” I almost can’t ask. “What are they doing with their skin?”

He grabs my arm and pulls me against the wall. There are voices in the distance, but they’re too far away to make out anything intelligible. “Shh. The tunnels echo.”

My heart bangs against my ribs, and I try not to make a sound while he stares down the black hole.

He pushes his long, greasy hair out of his face. “They sell the good skin for grafts.”

“Grafts?” I’ve never heard the word before.

He rubs his good eye, and I notice how thin his arm is under the long coat. I wonder when he ate last. My father forgot to eat sometimes. He said he lost his sense of taste and smell after the

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He swallows hard. “Time to go.”

We follow the muffled sounds until we reach the mouth of the tunnel. The passage in front of us looks more like a cavern than a sewage tunnel. A gray metal building stands a few yards away, artificial light illuminating the barred windows. This place looks more like a prison than a laboratory.

The man who refuses to tell me his name pulls a gun from the back of his waistband. It’s old, and it doesn’t resemble the weapons protectorate officers carry.

He notices me staring. “It’s a semiautomatic, from the days before the Burn.” He slides a cartridge out of the bottom. “This thing doesn’t shoot fire. These are hollow-tip rounds. They can kill you in the blink of an eye.”

“Do I need one of those?”

“Only have one,” he whispers. “Guess that means I’m going first.”

He edges his way closer as shadows move in front of the windows. I realize he’s risking his life to help me, and I wonder why.

But there’s no time. He’s already at the door using something to pick the lock. I rush to catch up, my mind racing.

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Evacuation, and everything tasted like cardboard—whatever that was.

“You can replace burned skin with new skin. At least a doctor can. They call it a skin graft. Works better than those expensive salves,” he says. “And people say it looks almost as good as the skin you were born with.”

It sounds barbaric and painful. “Who would do something like that?”

He laughs, the sound laced with bitterness. “Wealthy people who don’t want to look like they’ve been burned like the rest of us.”

“They’re willing to kill kids to get rid of their burns?” The Skinners aren’t the only monsters.

“Maybe they don’t ask questions about where it comes from. Or maybe they do. People are capable of all kinds of evil.” He peers down the tunnel again.

“Why doesn’t someone stop them?” I realize how accusatory it sounds, but I don’t care.

“The Skinners run things down in the Abyss. People that question them end up dead—along with their friends, their families, in some cases whole tunnels full of their neighbors. There’s no Protectorate down here. The Skinners are the law. No one can touch them.”

I can see the shame hiding in his eyes.

How many Skinners are inside? Do we stand a chance against the kind of people who cut the skin off children?

He grabs my outercoat, his voice low. “When we get in there, we’ll only have a few minutes.” He nods at the door. “That’s the surgical room. Run past and stay to the right. They keep the kids in a box in the back. If they’re still here.”

A box?

Bile rises in my throat, but I force it back down.

“What if it’s locked?” I try not to picture my sister trapped in a box like an animal.

He hands me a thin piece of metal. “Slip this in the lock and jiggle it around until you hear a click. Then get the kids out of here.”

“What if they aren’t there?”

“If they’re still alive, they will be.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve been here before.” It’s the last thing he says before he pops the lock.

We step inside and I freeze. Metal tables and trays of crude instruments covered in dry blood dominate the room. A dirty pole with a plastic bag suspended from it looms in the corner. I don’t want to think about what they do in here.

Was Sky in here?

My stomach convulses.

"Go," he hisses at me, pointing to the door at the end of the room.

I obey and rush to the dark corridor on the other side. I stay to the right like he told me, working my way to the far side of the building. I hear muffled voices in other rooms, but I can't stop or think about what the Skinners will do to me if they catch me.

Instead I think about Sky. I pretend she's only a few feet away and all I have to do is get there.

The corridor is dimly lit, but I see the rectangular metal container at the end. It looks like a rusted shipping container from a factory. The box.

When I get closer, I see the slats along the sides of the metal. The stench of sweat is everywhere, and it fills me with hope. If the kids were dead, the odor would be different. But it could also be the lingering scent of children who are no longer inside. . . .

I slip the thin piece of metal in the lock and move it around.

Nothings happens.

I try again. This time I hear the pop, and I pull the door open, anticipating the worst.

Nothing could've prepared me for what I find inside.

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73%

used the skin of some helpless child to repair his own. But there are other thin scars—most likely made by knives—running down his neck. His brown outercoat is crusted in dry blood, and he's holding a Protectorate-issue firearm.

I pull Sky to her feet and shove her behind me. "I—I came for my sister."

The man stares over my shoulder at Sky. "She's not going anywhere. We'll get a lot for her skin. Those blue eyes too." I shudder, and he looks me over. "Yours not so much. But if your legs are clean, you'll be worth skinning."

He steps into the small container, so close I can almost reach out and touch him. Another man steps inside behind him, holding an identical weapon. He moves to the corner, covering me from a different angle.

"I'll stay. Just let my sister go."

Both men laugh, and I want to kill them.

"I say you let them all go," a familiar voice calls from the corridor. His expression is fierce, the patch covering his missing eye. He's pointing his gun at the man doing the talking.

"Ransom. I was wondering when you'd come back," the man in the bloodstained outercoat says. "Looking for work?"

4 mins left in chapter

74%

Eight or ten children huddle together in the corner. Most of them look about Sky's age, but some are older. They're filthy, dressed in torn hospital gowns. But I know if I make it out of this place alive, it's the look in their eyes that will haunt me forever—complete and utter terror.

There's nothing else left.

I run toward them, trying to find my sister in the huddle. "Sky?"

A soft sound pushes its way forward from the back of the group. "Phoenix?"

I try to move the other children out of the way so I can find her. "I'm not going to hurt you," I promise them.

I see a stripe of blond hair.

Sky looks up at me, her face as tormented as the others. Her eyes look less blue somehow. I gather her into my arms. "I'm going to get you out of here. All of you."

Flashes of hope pass across their faces, though some of them seem too weak to react.

"That's a big promise for a girl who's in way over her head."

My neck snaps back to the door.

A huge man stands in the doorway. His face is noticeably lighter than his hands. He's probably

"I had no idea what you were doing down here, Erik," Ransom, the man who refused to tell me his name, responds.

Erik laughs. "The lies we tell ourselves."

"You said we were doing experiments to help burn victims."

The corner of Erik's mouth lifts. "Technically, it was true."

Ransom's expression hardens even more. "Today it's going to get you killed if you don't let these kids go."

Erik raises an eyebrow and points his weapon at Ransom. "You shouldn't have come back. I warned you, didn't I? And look what it cost you last time."

Last time.

"I should've killed you then." Ransom winces and his jaw tightens.

"Except you couldn't." Erik glances at the guy in the other corner of the container. "The odds have never been in your favor."

Ransom's grip on the gun tightens. "I'll say it one more time. Let them go."

"No one's going anywhere. Think you can point that relic at me and I'll hand over the kids?" Erik's eyes narrow. "I'm gonna burn the skin off your bones. Then I'll take your other eye and sell it to the

lowest bidder.”

The man in the corner laughs. “Maybe we should give it away.”

Ransom examines the outdated gun in his hand. “This thing is my good luck charm. But I did bring some other *relics* with me.”

Ransom opens his outercoat, revealing a black vest covered in bricks of plastic that look like putty. He raises his free hand, holding some kind of switch attached to the vest. “Remember C-4, Erik? It’s old, but you used it to blow up plenty of tunnels down here.”

I remember when Ransom disappeared behind the screen in his shack. He must have put the vest on then.

The kids start crying.

“Why now, Ransom?” Erik taunts. “You could’ve come back here a million times. Is your mind finally that far gone?”

Ransom glances in my direction, but he’s not looking at me.

He’s staring at the wisp of tangled blond hair peeking out from behind me. Just like the blond boy’s hair in the photo on his wall.

“I’m doing this for my son. For Alex. You’re not taking him again.”

2 mins left in chapter

74%

We run through the passage and the sadistic surgical room, into the mouth of the tunnel that led me here. We’re only a few yards away when the deafening sound of the explosion hits.

The concrete around us rumbles, and I can see the fire consuming the building in the distance.

For a moment, I can’t move. I stare at the flames that keep us locked in the shadow of a life only some people remember. Fire has always represented pain and sorrow for me. A sad sort of imprisonment none of us can escape.

Today, it represents something else.

Freedom.

A tiny girl with knotted curls is sobbing. “I don’t know how to find my way home.”

A boy with dark-brown eyes glances around. “Me either.”

Sky squeezes my hand and looks up at me, her eyes the shade of blue I remember. “My sister knows the way.”

I study their tear-streaked faces and I think about my father. The way he led so many down here to safety; the way I’m about to lead only a few back up now. I think about the price he paid for it, and what he said to me the last time I saw him.

Be brave, Phoenix.

1 minute left in chapter

75%

I realize he’s referring to Sky, and I’m not sure if it’s the delusions talking or if he means it symbolically.

Erik’s expression changes. He realizes he’s not going to be able to scare Ransom. Right now, Ransom is the most terrifying person in the room. And—judging by whatever he has strapped to his chest—the most dangerous.

“You have ten seconds to let them go before I start counting. If you do, I might let you live. But I’m blowing this place either way.”

Ransom’s lying. He’s going to kill them. I can tell by the way he looks almost happy.

Erik nods at the other man. “Turn them loose.”

I grab Sky’s hand and help up some of the children. They look dazed, as if they aren’t really sure what’s happening. The ones with bandages on their arms lean against the stronger children as we inch our way between the men locked in a standoff.

I stop in the doorway and look at Ransom—the man who saved my sister and all the other children stumbling down the corridor now.

The man who’s half crazy and all hero.

“Thank you.”

He nods. “Thanks for reminding me there’s always a way to right a wrong. Now get out of here.”

Today I was braver than I ever believed I could be.

Today I changed things.

Sky is still staring up at me. “You know the way, don’t you, Phoenix?”

For the first time, I know I do.